DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 344 273 CS 507 811

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TITLE "One More Time, Let Me Justify This War": An Analysis of President Bush's Declaration of Days of Thanksgiving.
PUB DATE Oct 91
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (77th, Atlanta, GA, October 31-November 3, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Discourse Analysis; *Presidents of the United States; Public Speaking; *Religious Factors; Rhetorical Criticism; War
IDENTIFIERS *Bush (George); Controversial Topics; Gulf War; *Rhetorical Strategies

ABSTRACT

President Bush's declaration of April 5-7, 1991 as National Days of Thanksgiving is a unique example of Presidential civil religious discourse: no other President has ever made such a declaration to thank God for a victory in war. Whether he intended to or not, President Bush engaged in a rhetorical form which allowed him to manipulate a very controversial issue. Bush selected dialogue uncharacteristic of his rhetorical style but which mirrored previous Presidential civil religious discourse of other eras. By placing this rhetorical strategy onto the genre of Presidential post war rhetoric, Bush capitalized on a national mentality and extended his justification for decisions concerning the Gulf War. Future Presidents need only use some Bible verses and theological language to show to the American people that a certain issue was God's will. Any disapproval of that action would be unAmerican. (The text of the Declaration of National Days of Thanksgiving is included.) (RS)

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"One More Time, Let Me Justify This War"
An Analysis of President Bush's Declaration of Days of Thanksgiving

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CS507811

Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Annual Convention, October 31 - November 3, 1991, Atlanta, Georgia

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With the Fall 1990 release of Bette Midler's "From a Distance," the song's refrain of "God is watching us..." seemed to set a precedent of civil religious discourse that would continually be associated with the Persian Gulf war. The common phrase "God Bless America" grew into "Pray for our troops" and "Ask God for a swift victory in the gulf." Civil religion, or the assumption that "God is on our side," has been a part of American culture since the early days of this country's development. Bellah (1968) notes that "...there actually exists a well institutionalized civil religion in America" (p. 3).

Not wanting to miss an opportunity (and a chance to further justify U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf), President Bush rode this wave of civil religion when, on April 5-7, 1991, he declared those days as National Days of Thanksgiving. In his official declaration, President Bush asked Americans to gather and give thanks to Almighty God for our victory in the Persian Gulf.

Insert Appendix A About Here

When studying Presidential war rhetoric, it is not uncommon to find references to civil religion. However, this particular example of Presidential civil religious discourse is unique in that no other President has ever declared a post-war National Days of Thanksgiving to thank God for a victory in war.

Why this declaration at this point in history? The answer, I believe, goes beyond the text and lies in Bush's motives. Although timely in delivery and perhaps appropriate to the setting, Bush's motive and intent are clearly inappropriate. Bush manipulates the strategy of civil religious discourse to further substantiate justification of U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf. His message is that God's assistance in helping America win the war, proves that God was on our side. More important, anyone who opposses the war, in essence, opposses God's chosen mission for the United States.

To better understand how Bush manipulates civil religious

discourse, I will explain why this rhetoric is uncharacteristic of Bush's speaking style. Identification of the imitation of antecedent rhetorical forms of Presidential civil religious discourse in the declaration will be provided. Finally, I will extend and support the argument of manipulation.

Unique form of Rhetoric

An examination of twenty-three speeches[1] delivered by President Bush before, during, and after the gulf war, shows that six speeches make no reference at all to God. Seventeen speeches end with the obligatory "God Bless America." In only one speech, the "Start of the Ground War" address delivered on Feb. 23, 1991, does Bush engage in a theological reference, albeit this reference is brief and appears in the conclusion.

Consequently, it is very uncharacteristic of Bush to engage in the type of theological rhetoric displayed in his declaration. In fact, Bush had previously attempted to disassociate religion from the war altogether. When speaking to the National Religious Broadcasters convention in early February, 1991, Bush stated that "The war in the gulf is not a Christian war, a Jewish war, or a Muslim war. It is a just war" (Woodward 1991 p. 47). Since "Just War" philosophy, as we understand it today, originates from Augustan theology, this statement further supports the argument that Bush does not understand the role of theology and war.

Why does Bush feel justified two months after the "just war" comment to turn the war into an obvious theological issue? What were his motives? Bush engaged in a Presidential rhetorical act which no other President has ever achieved[2]. Not only is the discourse unique but the semantics employed by Bush reflect a

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[1]All speches were randomly selected from various issues of Vital Speeches of the Day between February 1989 and Spetember 1991.

[2]Based upon search in library of Presidential documents and a conversation with a retired history professor of 32 years.

style unlike any form he has used before or since. This uniqueness captures attention and justifies analysis.

Antecedent Rhetorical Forms

Although Bush's civil religion references were unique for him, the references were not unique to the Office of Presidency. Bush imitates civil religious discourse found in the rhetoric of former Presidents. As Hart (1977) explains

> To a large extent, the rhetoric of American civil religion has become - in our times, at least - what Kathleen Jamison would call generically calcified. that is, it responds more surely to its own "antecedent rhetorical forms" than it does to the peculiartities of the exigence to which it responds...the story of civil religiosity in America is a story which has been told many times previously in the pages of rhetorical history - a story of the substitution of commonplaces for topoi as aids to rhetorical invention, of speaker's dependence upon stock phrases rather than ideas developed for the unique communication situation at hand. (p. 66-67)

Rather than responding to the exigence at hand, and providing American's with clear and honest answers about why the United States was really involved in the Persian Gulf, Bush instead supplies us with stock phrases and sermonic cliches delivered by other Presidents.

Bush's opening reference to a Psalm was first introduced by Eisenhower in a National Day of Prayer declaration in 1958 (Fox 1972 p. 265). When Bush later directs the reader to "seek reconciliation with all people," his words mirror those of Nixon's. In 1970, Nixon told the nation to "work for reconciliation and brotherhood among...people;" and in 1971 he declared that "The great need of our time is that of reconciliation. Nations should be reconciled to nations..." (Fox p. 279).

Bush also quotes former President Wilson, who admonished the United States to seek forgiveness for any "errors of act or purpose." Both Lincoln (1863) and Eisenhower (1953) directed Americans to confess sin and wrongdoing on the part of the U.S. in war activity (Fox p. 260).

Throughout the document, Bush makes blatent references to God's favoritism towards the United States. When Bush states that we are to "Thank the Lord for His favor...," his words echoed similar statements from Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson (Fox p. 269-272).

When Bush reveals that "...Our Heavenly Father, our help and shield, for His protection ...," and "Almighty God has answered the prayers of millions of people," he is again making reference to "America's God." This is a God who guides the nation, and who has been referred to as such in every Presidential inaugural address.

MANIPULATION

Bush's initial intent seems appropriate. He wants to thank God for a blessing God has seemingly granted. The problem lies in the inferential leap of the argument. The scripture used by Bush to support his claim cannot be used in the way he intends. Dispensational theology (Ryrie 1965) points out that those words and promises were specific words, for a specific people, for a specific reason, at a specific point in time. The words do not apply to the United States. Yet the American public assumes they do because of our civil religious mentality, a mentality manipulated by Bush.

By manipulating this Deistic favoritisim, Bush gains further support for all of his decisions regarding the Gulf War. His reasoning seems to be that since Americans subscribe to civil religion, his announcment will simply aonfirm what they already believe. To challenge civil religion would be to commit a type

of political suicide. If one were to object publicly to the declaration or to the war, this objection would be the same as saying that God was not on our side and that God has no intentions of "Blessing America." When confronted with potential political/social suicide, many skeptics might respond "I guess you're right. It must have been OK for us to be in the Gulf. God helped us win and we would not have won if He did not want us to be there in the first place."

The ramifications of Bush's declaration are extensive. I am sure that when previous Presidents engaged in civil religious discourse, the intent was never to justify death and destruction. However, as civil religion has developed, its antecedent forms paved the way for Bush to accomplish his goal. The inverse of this argument notes that Bush now creates a new antecedent form which will pave the way for future Presidential discourse. Bush and/or any future President who find themselves needing to justify some type of decision or action, may be able to resort to this strategy. Future civil religous discourse may help to hide or explain a multitude of sins.

Bush's Days of Thanksgiving declaration also provides some insight into what Americans understand about just war philosophy, theology, and rhetoric. It seems that we would rather ignorantly follow a myth, than learn Augustan theology/philosophy. A "just war" is not about God playing favorites nor is it about God leading the United States to kill thousands of people.

Summary

Whether he intended to or not, the fact remains that President Bush engaged in a rhetorical form which allowed him to manipulate a very controversial issue. Bush selected dialogue uncharacteristic of his rhetorical style which mirrored previous Presidential civil religious discourse. By placing this rhetorical strategy onto the genre of Presidential post war

rhetoric, Bush capitalized on a national mentality and extended his justification for decisions concerning the Gulf War. The ripple effects of this action could run deep and far. Future Presidents need only use some Bible verses and theological language to show to the American people that a certain issue was God's will. Any disapproval of that action would be unAmerican.

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Appendix A

Declaration of National Days of Thanksgiving

As the Psalmist wrote, "O give thanks to the Lord for He is gracious, for His mercy endures for ever."

Almighty God has answered the prayers of millions of people with the liberation of Kuwait and the end of offensive operations in the Persian Gulf region. As we prepare to welcome home our courageous service men and women and join in the joyful celebrations of the Kuwaiti people, it is fitting that we give thanks to our Heavenly Father, our help and shield, for His mercy and protection.

Asking Him to judge not our worthiness but our need and protection, and knowing that the Lord gives victory "not by might, nor by power," we prayed for a swift and decisive victory and for the safety of our troops. Clearly, the United States and our coalition partners have been blessed with both. We thank the Lord for His favor, and we are profoundly grateful for the relatively low number of allied casualities, a fact described by the commanding general as "miraculous." Nevertheless, because each and every human life is precious, because the massive scale of Operation Desert Storm must never diminish the loss of even one service member, we also remember and pray for all those who made the ultimate sacrifice in this conflict. May the Lord welcome all who have fallen into the glory of Heaven, and may He strengthen and console their families in their hour of need. May it also please our Heavenly Father to grant a full recovery to those military personnel wounded in action.

We also give thanks for the remarkable unity of our people throughout this conflict, a unity marked by heartfelt and generous support for our troops in the field and, in the American tradition, respect for the rights of those who dissent. May our Nation emerge from this conflict stronger and more unified, to face as one united people the challenges and opportunities before us.

As we unite in Thanksgiving to Almight God, let us pray in a special way for the innocent men, women, and children, where ever they may be, who have suffered as a result of the conflict in the Gulf. Recalling the words of President Wilson shortly after World War I, let us seek forgiveness for any "errors of act or purpose" and pray for God's help and guidance on the way that lies ahead. May the resolution of remaining questions and concerns, especially the return of all prisoners of war and the freeing of those who are detained, be as timely and as certain as this victory in battle.

Finally, seeing before us the promise of a safer, more peaceful world, one marked by respect for the rule of law let us offer all these entreaties in a spirit of faith, humility, and gratitude, seeking reconciliation with all peoples. In so doing, we recall the timeless prayer found in scripture:

"Thine, O Lord in the greatness, and power and the glory...for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine...and Thou reignest over it all...in Thine hand is power and might; and in thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all. Now therefore, our God, we thank Thee and praise Thy glorious name."

Now therefore, I, George Bush, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim April 5-7, 1991, as National Days of Thanksgiving. I ask that Americans gather in homes and places of worship to give thanks to Almighty God for the liberation of Kuwait, for the blessings of peace and liberty, for our troops, our families, and our nation. In addition, I urge all Americans to display the flag, and I ask that bells across the country be set ringing at 3 p.m. (EST) on April 7, 1991 in celebration of the end of hostilities in the Persian Gulf.